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AUTHOR Ogawa, Rodney T.; Pederson, Tom
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ABSTRACT

Although scholars have developed and applied various explicit conceptualizations of leadership to the study of educational administration, far less attention has been given to implicit or informal conceptions of leadership. Some recent studies claim that leadership impact on organizational performance is minimal or illusory; others argue that more subtle, previously unexamined forms of influence may be operating. This study examines: (1) the extent to which educators distinguish between the notions of leader, formal leader, and informal leader; (2) the behaviors educators associate with the concept of leadership; and (3) whether subgroups among educators hold different implicit theories of leadership. The University of Utah College of Education furnished 168 student participants, 79 from educational studies, 36 from special education, and 53 from educational administration. A questionnaire divided into demographic, open-ended, and self-assessment sections was used. Students were asked to describe the behaviors of a formal leader, an informal leader, and a leader; they were also asked to rate their desire and capacity to serve in each leadership category. Findings suggest that participants shared a relatively coherent concept of leadership. Respondents' concepts of leader may be slightly more closely aligned with their concepts of formal than with informal leader. The leadership inclination section showed more mixed results. Included are 4 tables and 19 references. (MLH)

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IMPLICIT THEORY OF LEADERSHIP AMONG EDUCATORS

Rodney T. Ogawa
The University of Utah

Tom Pederson
The University of Utah

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IMPLICIT THEORY OF LEADERSHIP AMONG EDUCATORS

Introduction

In this paper we report the findings of the first of a pair of studies aimed at describing the implicit theories of leadership held by educators. Implicit theories are the informal conceptions that exist in individuals' minds (Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, & Bernstein, 1981). We undertook this research for two reasons: one, scholars have not examined implicit theories of leadership and two, the content of implicit theories may inform the phenomenon of leadership, itself.

Background

It is widely held that educational administrators, by exerting leadership, influence the performance of schools and school districts. For reason, much attention has been given to leadership in the educational administration literature. Scholars have developed and applied a variety of conceptualizations of leadership to the examination of educational administration. That work has been guided almost exclusively by explicit theories of leadership.

Explicit Theories of Leadership

Explicit theories are those developed, recorded, and disseminated by scholars. Scholars, over the past three decades, have focused on a full spectrum of factors and dimensions of leadership. That range is evident in the variety of definitions of leadership that appear in the literature. Stogdill (1974, p. 7), after reviewing research and theory generated over a twenty period concluded: "There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept." These definitions have highlighted a range of factors, including the

attributes of leaders, the contextual determinants of leadership, the behaviors of leaders, and the interaction of context and behavior (Hoy & Miskel, 1979).

Early definitions of leadership often focused on the personal traits of leaders (Yukl, 1981). For example, Bingham (1926) described a leader as the group member who possesses the greatest number of desireable personality traits. More recently, Etzioni (1961) defined leadership as "power [that is] based predominantly on personal characteristics."

Other definitions have emphasized leaders' behaviors. Hemphill (1967), for example, wrote: "To lead is to engage in an act that initiates structure-in-interaction as part of the process of solving a mutual problem." Similarly, many authors, including Stogdill (1950) and Lipham (1964), defined leadership as behaviors intended to provide procedures or social structures that would facilitate the attainment of organizational goals.

More recently, scholars have begun to consider the interaction of leaders' behaviors and organizational characteristics. Katz and Kahn (1978) suggested that leadership is the influence exerted on the behavior of organizational members beyond that resulting from compliance with the organization's "routine directives." Fiedler (1967) posited that leadership is a function--the directing and coordinating of group activities--assigned to certain members.

Scholars, then, have given considerable attention to developing and testing a variety of explicit theories of leadership. However, a thorough review of the literature revealed no research aimed at the systematic examination of implicit theories of leadership. As stated above, implicit theories are informal conceptions that people hold in their minds but often do

not articulate. As Sternberg, et al. (1981) explained in discussing their studies of implicit theories of human intelligence, implicit theories are interesting for several reasons. First, they inform about the meaning that people attach to important concepts, like leadership. Second, implicit theories may influence how people interpret events and, thus, how they behave. Third, implicit theories may reveal important features of a phenomenon that are overlooked by existing explicit theories. Thus, a study of implicit theories of leadership is justified simply by the absence of research on the topic. However, recent trends in the leadership and educational administration literatures suggest another, perhaps more conceptually compelling, reason for examining peoples' informal theories of leadership.

Leadership From A Cultural Perspective

Research based on various definitions and related conceptualizations of leadership has yielded mixed findings. That is, research has not established clear and consistent linkages between the factors thought to be associated with leadership and the performance of organizations, educational and otherwise. This has led some scholars to conclude that the influence of leadership on the performance of organizations has been greatly exaggerated (Bridges, 1975; March, 1978; Pfeffer, 1978).

Pfeffer (1978) is one who has concluded that managers do not exert much influence on organizational performance. He argued, rather, that organizational members attribute causality to incumbents of top managerial posts to provide simple explanations for complex and apparently unfathomable organizational phenomena, such as overall performance. Thus, universities replace coaches when their teams perform below expectation, television networks replace executives when viewer ratings fall, and school districts

replace superintendents when test scores decline. This view of leadership is supported by findings of research on human cognition. It seems that people tend to overestimate the control exerted by individuals over the outcome of events (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Thus, the tendency to credit leaders with the ability to control organizational performance is simply a specific example of a general human tendency.

This does not necessarily mean, however, that further research on leadership is unwarranted. Rather, it suggests that the focus of leadership studies may need to be reconsidered. As existing definitions reveal, researchers have sought to determine what leadership is. If leadership is socially attributed, as Pfeffer has suggested, then it may be just as important to learn what leadership means.

Although Pfeffer (1981) has argued that the illusory nature of leadership belies any substantive impact of leaders on organizational performance, other authors suggest that it might not be quite so simple a matter. They have argued that the answer to the riddle of how leaders affect organizations may lie in subtle and previously unexamined forms of influence.

This approach has been particularly appealing to scholars who study administration and leadership in educational organizations. Because structural or nomothetic systems of control--such as technology, precise goals, written rules and operating procedures, and hierarchies of authority--thought to function in organizations are either absent or operate weakly in educational organizations, scholars have begun to call for the identification and examination of less formal and more subtle bases and forms of administrative influence, or leadership. For example, Firestone and Wilson

(1985) have observed that a complete depiction of the influence of school principals must include both bureaucratic and cultural linkages.

The cultural perspective has also gained a foothold in the broader literature on organizations (Smircich, 1983). From this perspective, leaders are depicted as influencing organizational behavior by influencing the manner in which members apprehend organizational reality. For example, Smircich and Morgan (1982) have described leaders as framers of organizational reality. Daft and Weick (1984), using the human mind as a metaphor, similarly suggest that top level managers alter the schemata, or mental structures, of organizations. And, while Pfeffer (1981) has posited that managers manipulate symbols but do not influence substantive activities in organizations, research on human cognition indicates that the consequences of belief in one's control over events are positive (Langer, 1983). In organizational settings belief resulting from symbolic action that an agent, or leader, can control organizational outcomes may have similarly positive consequences.

From this view, then, organizations are networks of meaning, whether cognitive or symbolic or both. Thus, understanding the way that people think about important concepts, such as leader, may provide insights to the nature of the phenomenon associated with those concepts. One approach to determining people's thinking is to determine their implicit theories about particular concepts.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the implicit theories that educators have of the concept of leadership. Following the literature on leadership in formal organizations, which draws a distinction between two types of leader--formal and informal (Hoy & Miskel, 1979), we sought to

examine the extent to which educators associated the notions of leader, formal leader, and informal leader. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What behaviors do educators associate with "leader"?
2. Do educators distinguish between leader, formal leader, and informal leader?
3. Do various subgroups among educators (i.e., regular educators, special educators, and educational administrators) hold different implicit theories of leader?

Methods

In this study, the first portion of a two part investigation, our purpose was to compile a master list of behaviors and characteristics of leadership and ascertain qualities of leadership that people readily recognize and seek in their leaders. From this list we sought to discover the most important qualities identified by people and to determine if there were significant differences between or within groups in the selection of those qualities. We also sought to ascertain differences between kinds of leadership based on inferences derived from self assessment and self rating questionnaires.

Population and Sampling

The population for the study was the College of Education at the University of Utah. From this population we obtained a convenience sample. We requested cooperation from several instructors throughout the college in an attempt to get an even distribution of student participants across the departments of special education, educational studies and educational administration. We selected eight classes, two from special education and three from both educational studies and educational administration. A total

of 168 students participated, 79 from educational studies, 36 from special education and 53 from educational administration.

Instrumentation Design

The instrument selected for data collection was a questionnaire of three parts: a demographics section, an open ended question section, and a self assessment section. Each subject was provided a two page questionnaire to complete. In the first section the subjects were asked for demographic information, highest level of educational achievement, and whether they had teaching and administrative experience.

In the second section they were asked to describe the behaviors of a "formal leader," an "informal leader," or a "leader." Three different instruments were prepared to reflect the three "kinds" of leadership. These were randomly distributed amongst subjects at each class so that while each student was asked to describe the behaviors for only one category, i.e., formal leader, informal leader or leader, all three categories were responded to evenly.

The third section asked them to rate: a) their desire to be a leader, formal leader and an informal leader, and to rate b) their ability to serve in each capacity. They were asked to rate themselves on a Likert scale ranging from one to five.

Pilot

The instrument and data collection procedure were piloted in two classes to determine how much time would be required to complete the questionnaire and to ensure that our instructions for completion were clear. We found that ten to fifteen minutes was ample time for completing the questionnaire.

Data Collection

The questionnaires were completed during class time under the direction of one of the two experimenters. The subjects were instructed from a written statement that included the disclaimer that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and in no way related to their standing in the class. They were then given fifteen minutes in which to answer the questions and provide the descriptions. They provided the demographic and personal experience information first and then were asked to provide the descriptions. There were instructed in writing and orally to complete the self-rating section on the second page only after they had listed all of the behaviors. This was done to help maintain their focus on the one aspect of leadership (leader, formal or informal) that they were asked to describe. Following this, they turned to the second page and completed the self rating section for each of the categories in regards to each kind of leadership position.

Data Analysis

The 168 subjects provided over seven hundred leadership descriptions. The descriptors were collapsed into 142 discrete categories. With these categories we set up a matrix that cross-listed the categories of descriptors (in the left column) with the kinds of leadership (leader, formal, informal) described by subjects in each department. Using this matrix we tabulated the frequency that each category was listed by subjects within one of the nine areas (one of three kinds of leadership within one of the three departments). That is, we tabulated the frequency with which each of the 142 descriptors was listed as a leader, formal or informal characteristic by department. The frequencies for each of the kinds of leadership were totaled to provide a fourth area (in addition to the three department frequencies) that reflected

the total number of times each descriptor was used for each leadership description.

Utilizing the frequency counts, we calculated correlation coefficients of within (departmental) group and between group frequencies to ascertain three things. First, we looked at frequencies to determine the most often cited behaviors and characteristics. Second, we looked for significant degrees of association in the way that people described leadership when distinguished as leader, informal or formal. Third, we determined whether there were significant differences between the way that individuals affiliated with different departments described leadership qualities.

Findings

The study resulted in two sets of findings about educators' conceptions of leadership: (1) findings based on respondents' descriptions of three types of leader and (2) findings based on respondents' self reported inclination and ability to be three types of leader.

Descriptions of Leader

Most frequently listed descriptors. Respondents' descriptions of leader, formal leader, and informal leader were compiled to form a master list. The list of all responses included over 700 items. The elimination of redundancies resulted in a master list of 142 descriptors, including both behaviors and characteristics.

Frequency counts of responses on the three types of leader--leader, formal leader, and informal leader--revealed many similarities and a few differences. The most frequently mentioned descriptors for each type of leader are listed in Table 1. Five descriptors were frequently attributed to all types of leader: organizes and plans, communicates clearly, takes charge,

TABLE 1

MOST FREQUENTLY LISTED DESCRIPTORS

Leader	Formal Leader	Informal Leader
Organizes and Plans (1)	Organizes and Plans (1)	Organizes and Plans (1)
Communicates Clearly (2)	Communicates Clearly (2)	Communicates Clearly (2)
Takes Charge (6)	Takes Charge (3)	Takes Charge (4)
Listens to Others' Views (7)	Listens to Others' Views (6)	Listens to Others' Views (8)
Sensitive to Others' Needs (11)	Sensitive to Others' Needs (8)	Sensitive to Others' Needs (3)
Knowledgeable (3)	Knowledgeable (10)	
Sets Group Goals (4)	Sets Group Goals (4)	
Makes Decisions (8)	Makes Decisions (8)	
Interacts Humanistically (5)		Interacts Humanistically (5)
	Friendly (5)	Friendly (7)
	Self Confident (9)	Self Confident (6)
Motives Others (9)	Gets Things Done (7)	Not Dictatorial (9)
Facilitates Others' Efforts (10)		Sets a Good Example (10)
		Charismatic (11)

( ) Notes ranking within leader type

listens to others' views, and sensitive to others' needs. Three were frequently mentioned in describing leader and formal leader: knowledgeable, sets group goals, and makes decisions. Two descriptors were frequently associated with formal and informal leader: friendly and self-confident. A single descriptor was frequently attributed to both leader and informal leader: interacts humanistically. Finally, six descriptors were mentioned frequently as characterizing only one type of leader. Respondents frequently characterized leader in the following two ways: motivates others and facilitates others' efforts; they frequently described formal leader in the following way: gets things done; and they frequently described informal leader the in the following three ways: not dictatorial, sets a good example, and charismatic.

(Table 1 about here)

Correlations of frequencies of descriptors. Table 2 shows the correlations between the frequencies with which each of the 142 descriptors were used by respondents from each department for each type of leader. For respondents from the Department of Educational Studies, frequencies of listed descriptors were significantly correlated for leader and formal leader, for leader and informal leader, and for formal leader and informal leader. The magnitude of the correlation between leader and formal leader was greater than those obtained for the other pairs.

(Table 2 about here)

Similar results were obtained from the other samples. For students in the Department of Special Education, frequencies of descriptors were moderately and significantly correlated for leader and formal leader, for leader and informal leader, and for formal leader and informal leader. While

TABLE 2

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FREQUENCIES
OF LISTED DESCRIPTORS

Variable	1	2	3
Special Education			
1. Leader	X	.49*	.41*
2. Formal Leader		X	.37*
3. Informal Leader			X
Educational Studies			
1. Leader	X	.72*	.59*
2. Formal Leader		X	.53*
3. Informal Leader			X
Educational Administration			
1. Leader	X	.63*	.56*
2. Formal Leader		X	.56*
3. Informal Leader			X
Overall			
1. Leader	X	.83*	.76*
2. Formal Leader		X	.76*
3. Informal Leader			X

* $p < .001$.

the magnitude of the correlation between leader and formal leader was again greater than those obtained for leader and informal leader and for formal leader and informal leader, the difference was less striking than the one obtained for the Educational Studies sample.

The same pattern emerged in the data obtained from students in the Department of Educational Administration. Again, frequencies with which descriptors were listed were significantly correlated for leader and formal leader, leader and informal leader, and formal leader and informal leader. And the magnitude of the correlation between leader and formal leader was slightly greater than correlations between leader and informal leader and formal leader and informal leader.

Last, we combined the data from all three samples. The total frequencies with which descriptors were listed were significantly correlated for leader and formal leader, leader and informal leader, and formal leader and informal leader. As in the case of the three samples, the magnitude of the correlation between leader and formal leader was the greatest.

These findings suggest that participants in the study share a relatively coherent concept of leader. This is reflected in the number of frequently listed descriptors shared by the three types of leadership and revealed more precisely by the significance of correlations between the frequency with which descriptors were listed for leader and formal leader, leader and informal leader, and formal leader and informal leader. The findings also suggest that respondents' concepts of leader may be slightly more closely aligned with their concepts of formal leader than with their concepts of informal leader, because the magnitude of the correlation between the former is consistently greater than that obtained for the latter across all samples.

Self-Assessment Ratings

Inclination To Be a Leader

In the inclination section of the questionnaire, we asked the subjects to rate themselves on a likert scale according to the extent to which they wanted to be a leader, formal leader and an informal leader. The scale ranged from a "1" representing "not at all" to a "5" representing "very much." Here we ran Pearson correlation coefficients within department responses to determine if subjects distinguish between kinds of leadership as measured by varying inclinations to hold such positions. The figures of Table 3 show the correlation coefficients for the self-rated inclination of subjects in each setting for each leadership variable.

(Table 3 about here)

For subjects from the department of special education the results show that the highest correlation is between their inclination to be a leader and an informal leader with a coefficient of .69. The correlation between their desire to be a leader and a formal leader and between informal leader and formal leader are considerably less, with coefficients of .51 and .52 respectively. The mean level of inclination toward leadership, formal leadership and informal leadership is 3.5, 2.7 and 3.5 respectively.

For the department of educational studies, the strongest correlation is between their inclination to be a leader and a formal leader with a coefficient of .61. The correlation between leadership and informal leadership reflected a coefficient of .37 while the correlation between formal leadership and informal leadership reflected a coefficient of .39. The mean level of inclination toward leadership, formal leadership and informal leadership is 3.7, 2.9 and 3.7 respectively.

TABLE 3

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELF RATING
OF INCLINATION

Variable	1	2	3
Special Education			
1. Leader	X	.51*	.69*
2. Formal Leader		X	.52*
3. Informal Leader			X
Educational Studies			
1. Leader	X	.61*	.37*
2. Formal Leader		X	.39*
3. Informal Leader			X
Educational Administration			
1. Leader	X	.73*	.46*
2. Formal Leader		X	.27**
3. Informal Leader			X

* P< .001
** NOT SIGNIFICANT

For the department of educational administration, there was reflected both the strongest and weakest correlations of variables among the groups. The strongest correlation occurred between the variables leader and formal leader and reflected a coefficient of .73. The weakest correlation of variables, which was also the only correlation not found to be significant,also appeared in this group and was the .27 coefficient level between formal leader and informal leader. The correlation between leader and informal leader reflected a .46 coefficient. Also in this group was found the highest mean level of inclination. The mean of inclination toward leadership was 4.2, toward formal leadership was 3.8 and toward informal leadership 3.9.

The combined mean across the three variables for inclination was 3.23 for special education, 3.42 for educational studies and 3.97 for educational administration.

Ability To Be a Leader

On the ability section of the questionnaire, we asked the subjects to rate themselves on a likert scale according to their ability to perform as a leader, formal leader and an informal leader. The scale ranged from a "1" representing "poor" to a "5" representing "excellent." Here too we ran Pearson correlation coefficients within department responses to determine if subjects distinguish between kinds of leadership as measured by varying self-assessed abilities to hold such positions. The figures of Table 4 show the correlation between self-assessment of subjects in each setting for each leadership variable.

(Table 4 about here)

For the special education group we found the strongest correlation of assessments between their assessment of themselves as leader and informal

TABLE 4

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELF ASSESSMENT OF ABILITY

Variable	1	2	3
Special Education			
1. Leader	X	.62*	.70*
2. Formal Leader		X	.52*
3. Informal Leader			X
Educational Studies			
1. Leader	X	.61*	.25**
2. Formal Leader		X	.53*
3. Informal Leader			X
Educational Administration			
1. Leader	X	.65*	.52*
2. Formal Leader		X	.56*
3. Informal Leader			X

* P< .001
** NOT SIGNIFICANT

leader with a coefficient of .70. The coefficient rating between leader and formal leader was .62 and between informal and formal leader was .52. The mean level of assessment for leader, formal and informal leadership was 3.64, 3.00 and 3.67 respectively.

For the department of educational studies, the levels of correlation were much less strong than for special education. The strongest coefficient was .53 correlation between formal leadership and informal leadership. The coefficient for leader and formal leader was .40, while the coefficient between leader and informal was insignificant at .25. The mean level of assessment for leader, formal and informal leadership was 3.80, 3.18 and 3.89 respectively.

The department of educational administration subjects showed their strongest correlation of assessment between leader and formal leader with a coefficient of .65. The correlation level between leader and informal leader was .52 while the correlation between formal and informal was .56. The mean level of assessment for leader, formal and informal leadership was 4.02, 3.70 and 4.02 respectively.

The combined mean across the three variables for assessment was 3.44 for special education, 3.62 for educational studies and 3.91 for educational administration.

Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that educators do share a relatively coherent implicit theory of leadership. This is particularly evident in the findings on how respondents characterized three types of leader. However, there also is some evidence that there may be slight differences between subgroups. This was reflected in respondents' inclinations towards the three

types of leadership and assessment of their own leadership abilities. Analysis of those data revealed that students in educational administration and educational studies tended to associate leadership with formal leadership, while students in special education tended to associate leadership with informal leadership.

The differences between subgroups' implicit theories, however, appear to be relatively small. If educators do, indeed, share an implicit theory of leadership, what are the specific elements of the structure of educators' implicit theory of leadership? Employing the findings of the present study as a foundation, the authors have begun a second study in which data gathered through a survey will be factor analyzed in an attempt to answer that question.

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